

---

---

## HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 15-10

### **St. James Mutual Homes**

201-217 P Street SW; 1410-1414 3<sup>rd</sup> Streets SW; 200-220 and 215-229 O Street SW and 1411  
and 1415 James Creek Parkway SW  
Square 547, Lot 23

Meeting Date: October 22, 2015  
Applicant: St. James Mutual Homes (owner)  
Affected ANC: 6D  
Staff Reviewer: Kim Williams

---

---

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the St. James Mutual Homes in southwest DC as a historic landmark in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, and requests that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing under the Multiple Property Document *Apartment Buildings in Washington, D.C., 1880-1945*.

### **Background**

The St. James Mutual Homes complex, formerly known as the Kober-Sternberg Courts, was constructed by the Washington Sanitary Improvement Company (WSIC) and its off-shoot, the Washington Sanitary Housing Company (WSHC) in 1937 and 1939 to provide housing for persons of moderate income. The Kober-Sternberg Courts complex, built towards the end of the “sanitary” housing movement, were two of the last examples of philanthropic housing constructed by the WSIC and the WSHC. Both the Kober and Sternberg Courts were designed by notable architect Appleton P. Clark Jr., who was the principal designer for the WSIC.

Sanitary housing was a Progressive-era philanthropic housing movement which sought to provide affordable and decent living conditions for the working class. The movement employed efficient, but high-quality designs that offered “sanitary” conditions such as running water and electricity. Unique management systems helped maintain the housing complexes and the needs of the residents while offering a moderate dividend to investors. While the primary goal of the movement was the improvement of housing conditions and thus the consequent improvement in public health, its promoters also believed that they could improve the morals and culture of the poor by providing a wholesome environment that would teach middle-class values. Unlike in other cities where housing reform efforts focused on multi-story tenement housing, the movement in D.C. arose over concern about the city’s over-populated and insanitary alley housing.

The movement established itself in D.C. in 1897 with the founding of the Washington Sanitary Improvement Company. The WSIC was founded by quintessential Progressives, George Kober and George Sternberg, both distinguished physicians and civic-minded Washingtonians intent upon improving public health. From the start, however, the WSIC billed itself not as philanthropy but as good business run by businessmen. The WSIC promised a safe five-percent

dividend in the hope of attracting a broad base of investors. Within months of its incorporation, the WSIC began construction of its first project—eight duplex houses on Bates Street off North Capitol Street that are still occupied today. These Bates Street duplexes (consisting of four-room apartments on each floor) gave the appearance of single-family dwellings and provided a model for WSIC housing in its first decade of business. Upon completion, the apartments rented for between \$9.50 to \$12.50 a month.

In 1904, the Washington Sanitary Housing Company was formed as an off-shoot of the WSIC to provide housing at even lower rents. In order to do so without cutting quality of design and construction, the WSHC lowered its maximum annual return for investors from five to four percent. The first WSHC project was a row of twenty duplex “houses” for African Americans between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4 ½ Street and M and N Streets in Southwest. Between 1907 and 1914, the WSIC and WSHC constructed sanitary housing in all quadrants of the city, with more than 150 duplexes built in Southwest alone. Although they constructed complexes that were racially segregated, the companies provided housing for both whites and African Americans. During World War I, the WSIC and WSHC halted construction, preferring to focus on maintenance and improvements to their existing building stock. During the 1920s, the WSIC and WSHC began building again, a process the companies intensified during the Depression, taking advantage of the city’s need for more affordable housing and a drop in land and construction costs.

During this second phase of development, the companies changed their housing model from two-story duplexes to garden apartments. Garden apartments, which had first appeared in the city in the 1920s, appealed to the sanitary housing movement as the small-scale buildings were organized around green space and provided “superior air circulation, more pleasing views and enhanced light in each apartment.” By the late 1920s, apartment building had become an accepted form of middle-class housing, so the desire to mimic the city’s traditional single-family rowhouse form was no longer deemed necessary.

The Kober-Sternberg Courts complex began in 1937 with the WSHC’s construction of Sternberg Court, designed by Appleton Clark, south of O Street SW. Named in honor of the longtime leader of the WSIC, Sternberg Court consists of fifteen red-brick two-story multi-unit buildings, arranged in four rows in a trapezoidal pattern around a central courtyard, with open porches on all 56 units. Clark designed the complex in a Colonial Revival mode perhaps inspired by nearby landmark Wheat Row, with pedimented central pavilions, quoins, and a roof parapet.

In 1939, the WSIC followed up with Kober Court, across from Sternberg Court on the north of O Street SW, also designed by Clark. Here, he designed a 51-unit three-story three-wing complex arranged around a central court, in a pared-down Colonial Revival style. Kober Court would become Washington’s final sanitary housing project<sup>1</sup>, as well as the last project of Appleton Clark’s long career.

By 1959, Kober-Sternberg Courts, which was located in the Southwest Urban Renewal Area, had been purchased by the Redevelopment Land Agency. By then the RLA had decided that it

---

<sup>1</sup> The government’s entry into the housing market for moderate- and low-income tenants, particularly the establishment of the Alley Dwelling Authority, contributed to the end of the building program of the WSIC and WSHC. But the housing companies managed their holdings into the 1950s.

would only build open market-rate housing in the redevelopment area. Perhaps due to criticism for its failure to provide affordable housing, the RLA sold the complex to the St. James Mutual Home Cooperative, making Kober-Sternberg Courts one of only a few buildings to survive urban renewal in Southwest.

The St. James Mutual Homes renovated the housing complex, and in 1967, had sold 98 of the 107 apartments, mostly to former tenants. St. James Mutual Homes, sponsor of this nomination, is one of the city's oldest and most successful cooperative communities.

### **Evaluation**

The St. James Mutual Homes, formerly the Kober-Sternberg Courts is eligible for listing in the National Register under the Multiple Property Document, *Apartment Buildings in Washington, D.C., 1880-1945* as outlined in the nomination. The property meets D.C. Designation Criterion B (History) and National Register Criterion A for its “association with historical periods, social movements and patterns of growth,” namely for its role in the development of Southwest, with particular regard to the development of high-quality affordable housing in a part of the city that was at the time rife with sub-standard and insanitary housing. The construction of Kober-Sternberg Courts represents a significant milestone in the development of planned housing for persons of moderate income and the evolution of the “sanitary housing” movement, a critical development in the history of housing reform in the District of Columbia. The Sternberg module of the complex was the last housing complex built by the WSIC and thus represents the end of the sanitary housing movement in D.C. Furthermore, the complex is one of a few properties that escaped demolition and survived the redevelopment of Southwest during the 1960s.

St. James Mutual Homes also meets D.C. Designation Criterion D (Architecture and Urbanism) and National Register Criterion C because it is a good example of a garden apartment, and an excellent representative example of the final evolution of sanitary housing design. The garden apartment model, as embraced by the WSIC and WSHC, responded to the influence of the Garden City Movement and sought to uplift the residents both morally and aesthetically through architecture and the landscape. The Kober-Sternberg Courts were designed by noted local architect Appleton P. Clark, Jr. in a Colonial Revival style characterized by its red brick walls, pedimented pavilions, quoins, and other treatment and details associated with the revival style.

The property may meet National Register Criterion D, for archaeological potential, but the nomination does not go into detail. A 1992 archaeological study notes that such a site may contain remnants of the James Creek Canal. It could retain something of the Washington Brick and Terra Cotta Company's factory as well, but the property has not been archaeologically surveyed. It has general potential for deeply buried canal remains, which should be kept in mind if there were to be deep ground disturbance.

The period of significance dates from 1937, with the construction of the first module of Kober-Sternberg Courts, to 1967, when the complex was re-opened as the St. James Mutual Homes cooperative.

The property retains a fairly high level of physical and historic integrity from its original construction.